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MOCA faces crucial choice

Six architectural firms compete for high-visibility assignment

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It's only April, but if Cleveland had an award for architectural client of the year, the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland already would be a very strong contender.

The museum announced in December that it plans to move from a low-visibility location in Midtown to a spectacular site a mile east in University Circle at the intersection of Euclid Avenue and Mayfield Road.

The new MOCA will anchor a larger effort by Case Western Reserve University to transform a dead zone of parking lots and drab storefronts into what it is calling an Arts and Retail District.

The project is part of a national trend in which universities are reaching outside their campuses to revitalize their surroundings. By June, Case hopes to pick a developer, at which point MOCA also hopes to have chosen an architect for its new building.

Everyone in the city, if not the region, has a stake in the Case/MOCA venture. With 40 cultural, medical and educational institutions, University Circle is the place most likely to give birth to new, knowledge-based industries of the future.

But the district, four miles east of downtown, will reach its potential only if it's a truly lively place. University Circle isn't there yet. That means it needs a stellar performance from every institution that has the power to shape the future.

MOCA is on track. The museum recently narrowed its search for a designer to six emerging architecture firms from England and the United States with a strong, forward-looking orientation. Any one of them could give the institution a fresh, vibrant contemporary landmark.

The contenders are: Foreign Office Architects, London; Michael Maltzan Architects, Los Angeles; Office dA, Boston; and Reiser + Umemoto, SHoP Architects and Studio MDA, all of New York.

Images of their work went on view Friday at Kent State University's Urban Design Collaborative at 820 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, and will stay up through Monday, May 15. A video installation of the same images will open Friday at MOCA and also will be on view through May 15.

Collectively, the firms represent a host of new formal and stylistic possibilities, from knife-edged geometries to flowing, biomorphic shapes or skeletal structures that display the forces of weight and mass.

But what really counts is that MOCA's approach is creative. It's not simply hitching its reputation to senior-level architectural stars such as Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind or Peter Eisenman.

Nor is the museum buckling under the usual pressure to hire a local designer. Cleveland has some fine architects. But few, if any, are capable of providing the kind of statement MOCA needs. In any case, MOCA's job is to introduce fresh ideas from outside the city, the state and the region.

MOCA director Jill Snyder says the museum wants "to produce an iconic building that is a significant architectural landmark for Cleveland internationally."

Just as important, she says, "is the recognition that this commission could be a breakthrough project for any one of the firms we are considering. We really embrace that and think it's so consistent with our mission of supporting and commissioning new creative work."

This is a very un-Cleveland philosophy, which makes it especially important now. For most of its history, Cleveland has been an echo chamber for established ideas imported from other, more progressive cities.

In fairness, Cleveland's deeply ingrained conservatism has endowed it with beautiful landmarks, from the Neoclassical buildings around the downtown Mall to Severance Hall and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

But the city has balked at chances to be truly innovative. Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe never found clients here, even though they were only a short distance away in Chicago.

Progressive Corp. couldn't arouse local government support in the 1980s when it proposed building a skyscraper on the lakefront designed by Gehry at an earlier stage in his career, before he achieved stardom with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

A decade later, civic leaders acquiesced when the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum hired I.M. Pei, then well out of his prime, to design what should have been a breakout building by a younger designer.

Case later hired Gehry to design the Peter B. Lewis Building for the Weatherhead School of Management. But that was after Gehry already was getting rave reviews for the Guggenheim in Bilbao.

More recently, Case built a series of new dorm buildings called the Village at 115 that exemplify the very latest thinking in street-friendly urbanism and energy-saving technology. How ironic that the whole complex is wrapped in collegiate Gothic architecture aimed at evoking nostalgia for the past.

MOCA, in contrast, wants to address the architectural possibilities of the present, and it's the perfect institution to do so.

Since it was founded in 1968 as the New Gallery, MOCA has championed art that's edgy, sexy and provocative. Under co-founding directors Marjorie Talalay and Nina Castelli Sundell, MOCA did far more to advance the cause of contemporary art than the more staid and infinitely more wealthy Cleveland Museum of Art.

Despite the excellence of its exhibitions, attendance at MOCA has lagged in the low 20,000s as a result of the institution's low visibility location on the second floor of the Cleveland Play House complex at 8501 Carnegie Ave.

A new and more visible location in University Circle, just a couple blocks from the Cleveland Museum of Art, could double, if not triple, MOCA's audience.

The architectural possibilities for a new MOCA, presented by the six finalists, are tantalizing:

Foreign Office Architects recently completed its new Yokohama International Port Terminal in Japan, a structure that doubles as a pier and as an urban park and is a piece of civic infrastructure, a structural tour de force and a work of art.

Michael Maltzan, a former associate of Gehry's who designed a temporary home for the Museum of Modern Art in Queens, N.Y., is a poet of lean, geometric forms bathed in light.

Markus Dochantschi of Studio MDA, who worked for Zaha Hadid as the project architect for the recently completed Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, is establishing his own creative identity. Among his newest designs is a plan for an unbuilt, mixed-use building in Dublin, Ireland, shaped in profile like a giant arm bent at the elbow.

Reiser + Umemoto revel in exposed structural systems, such as that of a delicate, latticelike bridge for a park in Taiwan or the twisting concrete blades of an unusual skylight proposed for the Children's Museum in Pittsburgh.

Office dA is known for exploring the richly expressive properties of materials. A gatehouse for an artists community outside Beijing has brick facades that resemble a rich textile. The firm's Interfaith Chapel at Northeastern University uses metal, wood and other materials to create a sacred atmosphere in a worship space used by more than 14 religious groups on campus.

SHoP Architects piggybacked an expansion atop an existing apartment building in Lower Manhattan, creating an eye-catching juxtaposition of new and old.

So far, MOCA has raised \$5 million for its new museum, which will encompass 35,000 square feet overall, with 10,000 square feet of gallery space.

Snyder doesn't want to estimate total project costs until after the museum has chosen a designer, which is wise at this point. But the final cost easily could be \$20 million or more.

If the project succeeds -- and there's every reason to believe it will -- it could show how Cleveland can face the future with a new confidence. By taking an inventive approach to the search for an architect, the museum has departed from the city's cautious, conservative mind-set and set an example well worth following. This is a moment to savor.

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